The following text is reproduced from the essay **"Flying Notes on Artstamp.dk"** written by **Mia Rosa Hartmann (2017–2018)** and based on interviews with **Sam Jedig**.

The text is reproduced here as part of the **Artstamp archive** documenting the conceptual framework and historical context of the Artstamp project initiated in 2007.

Minor typographical inconsistencies from the original publication have been preserved.

Flying notes on Artstamp.dk

What follows are extracts and afterthoughts from a series of interviews with Sam Jedig over the Winter and Spring of 2017.

Artstamp is a subtle act of confrontation. It creates cracks and crevices in social spheres to catch our attention and open our minds to critical, existential reflection while insisting to liberate people, societies and art itself from elitist conformity. As a tactic, Artstamp dresses like the tradition-bound stamp thus playing with the boundaries of tolerable disturbance of order. Bold but respectful to limits defined by norms held within the setting that each stamp operates. Carefully expanding spaces for critical dialogue and reflection, not violating them.

Artstamp interacts with a sign and thereby ignites an enigma: what is the symbolic relation of meaning between the two, and how does the intervention resonate or dissonate as passers search for an answer? From the Denmark Series of 1100 Jedig's own drawings printed on stamps.

In a skilled move, Artstamp touches upon movements in avant-garde art and its experimental project to fundamentally critique society and its established institution of art with direct or indirect aesthetic political intent being most profound in the situationist international group (1957–1972) intersecting the avant-garde and neo avant-garde periods.

Marking an avant-garde decade, Artstamp also activates the freeing forces of the internet in the sense that Jedig regularly posts individual or series of stamps online in a digital space that abolishes physical restrains on Artstamp's journey. In the digital world the possibility of how each stamp is distributed, how it imprints itself on people, places or perhaps even things and places, is in principle infinite. This serves as a reminder that art holds the potential to affect and even subvert dominating forms of power through patient, persistent, ever-present ingenuity of resistance. However seemingly small and "readymade", art is there. Here, as ideas that may mutate in form and interfere with existing ideas that it challenges, amplifies or twists.(1)

When Duchamp (2) submitted the fountain in 1917, an "ordinary article of life" to an art exhibition, his intent was to spur thought and question the ontology of art itself: a notion of art that implies the use of ready-made, industrially used materials and defines creativity in terms of the selection and placement of such materials.

Here Artstamp becomes an interactive and multi-layered staged photomontage, a comment to the art work, artists and the art world as Jedig and the American conceptual artist Michael Coughlan jointly present Coughlan's 2014 drawing with the title "Conceptual art…" printed on Artstamp.

On the Artstamp homepage Jedig invites people to take photos whenever and wherever they find an Artstamp. Occasionally, people accept the challenge by posting an Artstamp photo on their own social media pages or on Artstamp's Instagram page and hereby contribute to the act of arbitrary distribution and sense making.

A long-emerging manifest

Artstamp is not so much an experiment per se as it is an actual manifest accumulating from Jedig's life-long career as an esteemed Danish gallerist and, in effect, a hesitant artist.

It was a young and idealist Jedig who developed among aspiring contemporaries from the experimenting underground of street-art in 1990's Copenhagen.

Having worked with world-renowned artists, such as Olafur Eliasson, William Anastasi, Dove Bradshaw, Albert Mertz to name but a few, Jedig's project is at one and the same time a collective creation, a collection of creations and a comment seeking beyond conventional forms in which art is fundamentally and exclusively owned, both by its producers, consumers and agents.

Advertisement as street-art. In 1991, Jedig put up 40 posters around Copenhagen advertising pop-up exhibitions for example by "hacking" existing desirable billboards as the ones at Vesterbro station.

In 1991 Jedig founded the gallery Stalke Out of Space to move art exhibition out of its traditional frame and instead mobilize art in and with the world by merging atelier and gallery both for the artist and the audience as participants. Art is not only a mental and individualized journey it now becomes an assertive act of unconventional engagement with places, cultures and people. A mobility that was enabled by the abolishment of the gallery as one particular physical form for particular people, a territory, in which art, artist and observer are defined by tradition and conventional definition power.

In 2006 Jedig brought with him 10,000 printed logos of Stalke Out of Space with him on tour around the World to patch cities with the merging of gallery and art in one, culminating with Jedig covering himself in logo prints as an ultimate surrendering of self to its manifest, self-manifestation. Artstamp was born.

Artstamp thus took form in immediate extension of the intent to democratize art which again characterizes the mail art and net art movements, to which Artstamp subscribes, in terms of their central themes of free distribution and display of miniature art. A manifestation of a lifelong project as formed by and within an activist gallerist up until the present, and a self-manifestation of merging forces expanding the frontiers.

Artstamp messages weave in and out between the past three decades of both the Danish and international art scene as a tribute, memoir and extension. And in line with the work of other mail artists, such as Lomholt and On Kawara, each stamp is both a piece in its own and part of a total piece or, as Lillemose concisely phrases it: “the world’s smallest and largest exhibition space”.

Fragments of resistance

How can something so small and fragile as a tiny square of paper possess any power? In other words, what makes a stamp a potent instrument in confronting privileged positions and firm beliefs of people and societies? Of Art itself?

As a symbol, the stamp has traditionally been monopolized by authorities, starting from its invention as a pre-paid postal service facilitator in 1840’s England. As a symbol of authority it quickly depicted ruling authorities themselves: queens, kings, presidents, dictators. Today, the stamp displays a greater variety of national romantic or government icons but is still monopolized by formal authority.

It is precisely the hacking of the stamp as a symbol of authority and national territory that empowers Artstamp.dk as a silent and stealth confrontational tactic. The project is not to replace official stamps but to alter, nuance and multiply their function and message.

An illustration of the unconstrained powers implied with mail-art, Jedig issues eight censored sketches for the official Danish stamp that the artist Albert Mertz proposed to the National postal service, Post Danmark, and the Minister of Traffick, Arne Melchior, in 1984. Mertz had honorably been invited to make the new stamp, but his drawings were all refused then and again when they were re-submitted after his death in 1990. With acceptance from Mertz’ wife, Susanne Mertz, the censored series of stamp sketches are now issued as part of the Artstamp production.

Whereas the art pieces that are issued on official stamps are tied up in certain conformities and carefully selected through authorizing processes, Artstamp demonstrates how art is potent of so much more than what is selected out by the few in position to doing so. As an example, a series in the Artstamp collection carries ironic comments on political matters, exposing absurdities of contemporary societal matters.

Jedig posts a satiric comment to a heated public debate in Denmark about whether or not Muslim women should be allowed to wear their burka. Since it is illegal to claim the monopoly on the stamp as a National object of value, Jedig samples on a portrait of the Danish Queen Margthrethe II, 'dressing' her in a burka, while self-censuring the title 'DENMARK' which, together with any number, would also be illegal to use on an unauthorized stamp. Jedig posted a sheet of stamp to queen Margrethe and received a personal thank you letter in return.

To Jedig, creativity and reflection are critical to (self-) reflective societies:

"Without creativity, a society becomes dormant. The more sensitive and alert we allow ourselves to be, the more we reflect and resist stagnation", he explains.

Artstamp is a shortcut to individual and collective self-reflection.

A minimalist touch of irony is for example performed by depicting individuals of the dominant elite together with symbols depicting their misuse of power.

On November 5 2006 Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death by hanging by the Iraqi Interim Government. The Artstamp shows Saddam Hussein with an American flag in the background and the word "Sorry" hanging in the air without it being clear who says it. Is it Hussein apologizing to himself, humanity or is it an anonymous voice from the choir of people with more or less transparent political self-interests pulling the threads of the process?

Jedig may also insist that a stamp becomes a more direct democratic tool by insisting on dialogue with powerful individuals, hereby attempting to expand traditional means of critical dialogue. Similar to when he sent a sheet of stamps directly to the Danish Queen, he has initiated dialogue with Danish ministers to which some respond and others do not.

In other cases, the stamps merely produce more implicit occasions for reflection, for example with one or few words

“SAVE ME”

An ultimate appeal to act in favor of the other. How do the words act on different people in different scenarios and cultures?

Each stamp invites people to startle, wonder and reflect, stealthy, rather than as a loud and aggressive attack on people and systems provoking them to shut down in defense. It is a continuous exploration of the sensitive balance and art of disruption. This is how a single art stamp becomes just safe enough for people to ‘lick in’ its micro-cosmos of chaos and just powerful enough in its expression to potentially provoke a change in thought.

Traces of existence

Each stamp mirrors today, and yesterday’s stamp is thus a trace of history. Individually, each piece is a volatile mirror of its present, a spark for existential reflection. As a collection, Artstamp is never collected, it is potentially everywhere because it is constantly being spread and mutated by course of its multiple journeys.

Artstamp is therefore not some monumental art piece in and for itself, but a trace of the existences of the time, lives and places it briefly sticks to, as Jedig reflects:

“By placing a variation of stamps in different situations and in interaction with different people and cultures, Artstamp becomes an experiment exploring people’s reactions: what happens when art moves beyond the traditional frames and out where people live their daily lives and not expect art to happen? When you move art out there, it becomes reality. It is about playing with the fact that people don’t know that they are part of arts’ reality until the moment that they realize it.”

At a deeply personal level, Artstamp has been the magical feather, a sense of safety, in an existential process – on behalf of himself and fellow artists – to turn the mysterious and often painful inner world of the artist inside out. Jedig explains:

“Many artists, I know, are tormented living in their own inner, mysterious world. It becomes imprisonment, disease. I was despaired by it myself, I needed to get out of that space and bring the mystic with me out and into the outside World. With Artstamp I seek spaces of life, where the World and I can be one. Those moments teach me to let go and free myself from the imprisonment. Is it vanity to document existence because it is so short? Perhaps. But I need to document the moment. We are constantly exposed to impressions and we forget the moment. But the moment makes life present.”

Artstamp is therefore both a means and end of relating, each stamp being a joker invoking unpredictable social responses aiming to ignite self-consciousness. In the transactions between inner and outer worlds of the inviting and the invited, Jedig experiments to transcend physical and mental spaces for art.

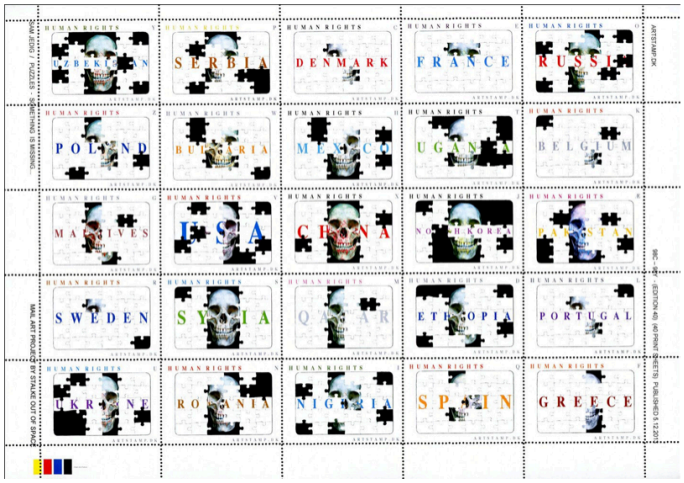
On a beach in Thailand Jedig places a line of stamps from the water to the top of the beach. He carefully monitors the scene from his hiding spot. The line of stamps is slowly being carried away by gentle waves. A small group of chattering women clean the beach as they notice the line of stamps. They stop and stare at it. Should they remove it? It is not usually there. Does the line serve a purpose? Their laugher breaks the silent startle, then the sound of their chattering briefly intensifies to a buzzing as they reach a consensus to leave it be. The carefully cultivated atmosphere of peacefulness is restored, or perhaps collectively ironized upon, as the alien object is tolerated.
Jedig explains how, in his experience, Westerners' adaptation to art performances sometimes numbs our receptivity. When he visited a Danish clothing store and politely asked if he could do an Artstamp photo shoot with their mannequin dolls, he was told to leave the place at once. But in places and cultures where people are less trained to weed out the little disruptions that art invites from the rest of the noise that surrounds us, it takes no more than a string of stamps on a beach to create an appropriate disturbance of the present.

Analogous to the string of stamps 'cutting' the beach in halves, a single stamp may 'cut' into the present, make noise, and close the moment again while leaving a mental or socially manifest change.

Transcending territory

Artstamp uses several tactics to move beyond limitations imposed on art by the selective consumption of established institutions.

The .dk internet domain may seem like a somewhat ambiguous signal swearing to a national domain, but to Jedig the domain serves as a protection of his freedom of speech. While open critique of China's violations of human rights would not be tolerated on Chinese territory, Denmark is in many ways the quintessence of the freedom of speech, even taken to its radical form, as demonstrated in the case of the infamous Muhammed drawings by Troels Pedersen which Artstamp also has referenced.



Artstamps using the metaphor of a puzzle to illustrate the degree to which different nations respect human rights. Will pieces be added or removed in future governmental acts?

Artstamp.dk becomes a demonstration of the right and importance to ignite political debate openly while lending to its democratic exile for critique.

An important element of Artstamp is also its existence on the World Wide Web, allowing the stamps to be accessed and distributed potentially globally. Dialogues are facilitated through its Instagram profile where stamps tag people and people tag stamps: "Hey, its me!"
A couple in Spain notice an Artstamp on a bench and traces it back to its internet home: "Hey we found you!" Or did the stamp find them?

The afterlife of a stamp takes an unpredictable course as it actuates known and unknown recipients through points of contacts that create openings for dialogue and reflection. It mobilizes art across cultural and physical borders while proving the bare essentials for the exhibition and social mutation of an art piece: a miniature physical space of paper enabled through open distribution.

One of Artstamp's branches, Artstamp guest, is another move dedicated to the work of colleagues selected on basis of a shared intent to hack stagnancy and the self-sufficiency of the established art institutions. Here, Jedig plays with the contradiction between exclusiveness and diversity. He may exhibit an art piece that opted out of the selection to serve as an official postal stamp demonstrating the essentials of an open gallery by redefining 'white cube' space as a self-made square of paper open to any possible depiction

One interpretation of Artstamp is that of a tactical maneuver using the overall palette of its surroundings. In this way it leaves traces while constantly changing its forms and expressions in the eyes and hands of its recipients.

Each stamp is a fragment of the larger collection and can be traced to its Birth as an alchemistic process partly documented by photos as it creates small openings for reflection from within cultures and places where many people succumb to illusions of piece and quit. How and what people fill the gaps of disturbance is their choice, their responsibility.

Art is there.

Here.

Mia Rosa Hartmann 2017–18

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